

# SYNOPSIS OF THE LINCOLNS IN INDIANA 1816-1830



In the fall of 1816 a dark-haired frontiersman toiled along a narrow trace leading through the dense forest of southern Indiana. Sixteen miles from the Ohio River, he came upon a scattering of dwellings lying just south of Little Pigeon Creek, in a region of towering hardwoods, plentiful game, and good water. Choosing a quarter section (160 acres) of Government-surveyed land for a home site, he marked the corners with brush piles and notched the largest trees. Then he set out on the long trek back to his farm in Kentucky to settle his affairs and bring his family to their new wilderness home.

For Thomas Lincoln, a carpenter and backwoods farmer, Indiana offered a fresh start. Here, he could own good soil, free of title disputes and the taint of slavery. Three times he had lost land in Kentucky because of title flaws, and others had claimed the fruits of his labor. Moreover, settlers were crowding in and slavery was becoming more controversial. So he turned his eyes across the Ohio River, to vast, new lands which held the promise of a better life.

Thomas Lincoln had worked hard at homesteading since he married young Nancy Hanks in a small Kentucky crossroads named Beech Fork in 1806. They made their first home in Elizabethtown, a thriving frontier village where Thomas worked as a carpenter and owned property. Sarah, their first child, was born here in 1807. Then a year and a half later the Lincolns moved south to settle on a newly purchased farm along the South Fork of Nolin Creek near Hodgen's mill.

Father, mother, and daughter reached the farm in mid-winter, shortly before a second child was due. Working quickly on a hill above a clear spring, Thomas built a one-room log cabin with a dirt floor, a stick-and-clay chimney, and a single window. Here on a Sunday morning, February 12, 1809, a son was born to Nancy and Thomas Lincoln. They named him Abraham after his grandfather.

The Lincolns lived at this farm for 2 years. It was barren, unyielding ground, and when a dispute arose over title to the land, Thomas again moved his family to a new farm of 230 acres along the bottom lands of Knob Creek.

Here was far more inviting country. The Lincoln place lay just within the hill region, where farm clearings and little cabins dotted the fertile valleys. Corn grew high, and the forest gave abundantly.

Within two or three years, Nancy gave birth to her third and last child, Thomas. Abraham recalled that, "A brother, younger, died in infancy." Some impressions of his

life here remained vivid. He remembered an old stone fort and a great poplar that stood along the family route to the gristmill. He remembered his boyhood companions; carrying water to the cabin and a vast rain that washed away pumpkin seeds he had so carefully planted the day before. Once he caught a fish and gave it to a passing soldier; another time he fell into the creek and was barely pulled out in time. He never forgot the names of his first teachers - Zachariah Riney, and Caleb Hazel, whose A.B.C. schools he attended for a few months.

For five years Thomas Lincoln farmed his land on Knob Creek, paying his bills, performing his public duties, and supporting his family. The increase of slavery bothered him. Yet it was not slavery that drove him from Kentucky, but land titles. In 1816 the heirs of an earlier landowner brought an ejectment suit against him and nine of his neighbors, claiming prior rights to the land. That fall, while the suit was still pending in court, he made up his mind to move to Indiana where he could hold his land without fear. When Thomas returned from his scouting trip, he gathered their possessions and the family started for the river crossing. It was December 1816 and Abraham was seven. Abraham later remembered the trip to the farm site as one of the hardest experiences of his life. After crossing the Ohio River at Thompson's ferry and following an old wagon road for 12 miles, they had to hack out the last distance through the dense underbrush. It was early winter. With the help of neighbors Thomas cleared a spot on high ground and put up a log cabin, finishing it within a few days. Then came an incident that left a deep impression on the young boy. A few days before Abraham's eighth birthday, a flock of wild turkeys approached the cabin. Standing inside, he fired his father's rifle through a crack and shot one. "I have never since," he wrote many years later, "pulled a trigger on any larger game."

The family lived on wild game and bartered corn and pork that first winter, until Thomas could clear enough ground for his first crop. Abraham was large for his age, and his father put an ax into his hands at once. Year by year they hacked away at the forest, eventually bringing under cultivation some 40 acres of corn, wheat, and oats. They also kept sheep, hogs, and a few cattle. In October 1817 with one crop in, he rode 60 miles to the land office in Vincennes and deposited \$16 on two tracts of 80 acres each. Two months later he paid \$64 more, one-fourth of the \$320 total price of. (Not until 1827 would he completely pay for his land. He did it then by relinquishing the east 80 acres as payment for the west 80, a common practice of the day. He also owned 20 acres that adjoined the west 80.)

In the fall of 1817 Nancy's kinfolk joined the Lincolns. Driven out of Kentucky by a similar ejectment suit, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow, Nancy's uncle and aunt, with their 18-year-old nephew Dennis Hanks, followed the Lincolns into Indiana and moved into a rough shelter on the Lincoln farm until they could find land and settle. Their coming cheered Nancy and gave young Abe a companion and Thomas another work hand.

Within a year both Sparrows died, victims of the dreaded "milk sickness" (snakeroot poisoning) that swept through southwestern Indiana in the late summer of 1818. No doctors lived nearby, and there were no remedies in any case. Thomas fashioned two

coffins and laid the Sparrows to rest on a wooded knoll a quarter of a mile south of the cabin. A few days later Nancy also became a victim of the "milk sickness" and died on October 5, 1818. Once more Thomas pegged together a coffin, with Abraham's help. Once more he trudged through the woods to the knoll where with little ceremony he buried his wife alongside the Sparrows. Abraham was only 9 and Sarah only 11. "She knew she was going to die," related Dennis Hanks years later, "and called up the children to her dying side and told them to be good and kind to their father - to one another and to the world...."

Nancy Hanks Lincoln lived and died according to the ways of the frontier, known only to her family and their neighbors. Those who knew her spoke long afterwards of her good sense and affectionate and deeply religious nature.

Young Sarah now took over the household chores, while Thomas and the boys hunted and tended to the farming. As the months stretched on, the four sank into a rough, haphazard existence. When Thomas could no longer stand the loneliness, he journeyed back to Kentucky in 1819 for another wife, Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children: Elizabeth, Matilda, and John.

On December 2, 1819, they were married in Elizabethtown. After loading a four-horse wagon with her goods, Thomas drove them back to the farm on Little Pigeon Creek.

Thomas had chosen well. The cheerful and orderly Sarah proved to be a kind stepmother, raising Abraham and Sarah as her own. Under her guidance the two families merged easily, and Thomas went to work with new energy, repairing the crowded cabin and clearing more land for crops.

Abraham, a dark-complexioned, rawboned farm boy, grew rapidly. From his companions we have a picture of a healthy, good-humored, obliging youth with a love of talking and listening. He had his share of mischief, but he seemed to have absorbed the best side of the frontier while rejecting the worst. He became an expert with the ax and worked alongside his father in the fields and the carpentry shop. Often his father sent him to the mill to grind corn and wheat into meal and flour. Sometime during his 11th year, at Noah Gordon's horse mill a mile south of the Lincoln cabin, he was kicked in the head and knocked senseless, "apparently killed for a time" in his words. Occasionally, he was hired out to work for others. Yet, he never cared much for manual labor.

What he did care for was words, ideas and books. In Indiana, as in Kentucky, his schooling came "by littles." During the winter of 1819-1820 he attended Andrew Crawford's subscription school held in an unhewn log cabin a mile south of the Lincoln cabin. Stern but capable, Crawford taught not only the elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also etiquette, or "manners" as they called it. Two years later James Swaney opened a school on a farm 4 miles distant, but Abraham went for only a few weeks.

Then in his 15th year, Abraham attended Azel Dorsey's school. Dorsey was well-trained, and under him Abraham probably received his best instruction. Years later Dorsey could still remember the boy as "marked for the diligence and eagerness with which he pursued his studies, (he) came to the log cabin schoolhouse arrayed in buck skin clothes, a raccoon-skin cap, and provided with an old arithmetic." A few scraps of his schoolwork survive, among them several pages of figures and a folk couplet that reads:

**"Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen  
he will be good but god knows when."**

Altogether, he spent less than a year in school. "There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," he declared later of his schooling in Indiana. Still, there gradually emerged a love of reading and a passion for knowledge that lasted a lifetime. He mastered the familiar classics of his day: *The Bible*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, and a score of others. Once he borrowed Ramsey's *Life of Washington* from Josiah Crawford, a neighbor. When the rain ruined it, he had to repay him by stripping corn for three days. When he was 11, he read Parson Weem's *Washington*. Forty years later, standing before the New Jersey legislature as President-elect of the United States, he recalled Weem's heroic tales:

"A way back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book . . . Weem's *Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggles here in Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single revolutionary event."

There were other influences as well. The boy had a good memory and a ready wit. Laying aside his work, he would often entertain friends with jests and imitations of politicians and preachers, the big men in his community. And at Gentry's store, down the road a mile and a half, he and Dennis Hanks passed long hours in talk and storytelling.

The part that religion played in his life during these years is less easy to place. In 1821 his father supervised construction of a new meetinghouse for Little Pigeon Baptist Church - an outpost of enthusiastic Protestantism - and Abraham probably worked with him. Two years later both parents joined the church, Thomas by letter, and Sarah "by experience." That year Abraham served as sexton which required his attendance whenever the church was open. He never joined, as his sister did just before her marriage, but on the frontier, young unmarried persons rarely undertook church membership.

Abraham experienced a new world when he went to work at the age of 16 on the farm of James Taylor along the banks of the Ohio. For \$6 a month he plowed, split rails, slaughtered hogs, and operated Taylor's ferry across the mouth of the Anderson River.

The life of a keel boatman had no appeal to him. It was the roughest work a young man could be made to do, he said later, but it exposed him to the vast spectacle of boats and people passing constantly along the Ohio.

While working there Abraham earned the first money that belonged to him rather than his parents. In his spare time he built a scow to take passengers out to steamers on the Ohio. One day he rowed out two men and placed them on board. To his surprise each threw him a silver half-dollar. "I could scarcely credit," he said, "that I, poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day." His ferrying stint led to a dispute with the Dill brothers, who ran a ferry on the Kentucky side of the river. Charging that Lincoln infringed ferry rights granted them by their state, they brought him before Samuel Pate, a Kentucky Justice of the Peace. Pate dismissed the case when Abraham pointed out that he had not taken anyone across the river but only to the middle.

By his 19th year Abraham had reached his full growth. Six feet, four inches tall and weighing nearly 200 pounds, he stood out in any gathering. He could wrestle with the best, and witnesses reported that he could hoist more weight and drive an ax deeper than any man around. He was ready when the chance came to take his first long journey. James Gentry, the richest man in the community hired Abraham to accompany his son Allen to New Orleans in a flatboat loaded with produce. Down the Ohio they floated and into the Mississippi, passing the time in talk, watching the river traffic, and working the poles to avoid sandbars. The only incident occurred along the Louisiana coast. While tied up along shore one night, an armed band of Negroes bent on plunder stole on board and attacked the sleeping boatman. In a wild fight the two youths drove them off, cut cable, and drifted on downriver. At New Orleans they sold their cargo and the flatboat and road a steamer back home. Lincoln caught his first real glimpse of slavery while in New Orleans. For his 3 month's work Abraham earned \$24.

Back in Indiana, Abraham must have contrasted the rich, bustling spectacle of New Orleans with the routine of farm life. He returned to his familiar chores of plowing, cutting timber, and helping with carpentry. He clerked for a while at Gentry's store, and he read more than ever. When court was held in nearby towns, Abraham would attend. It was during this period that he borrowed from his good friend David Turnham, the *Revised Laws of Indiana*, the only law book he is known to have read before leaving the State.

Abraham's sister, Sarah married Aaron Grigsby in 1827, but a year later, Sarah died due to complications of childbirth. This was another devastating incident in the young life of Abraham Lincoln.

In late 1829, the Lincolns decided to leave Indiana for the fertile prairies of Illinois. A year earlier John Hanks, a cousin of Nancy, had moved to Macon County in central Illinois. His glowing reports of the opportunities on the rich, easily cultivated prairie that was free of the milk-sickness, helped persuade Thomas to move.

Preparations began in September 1829. Returning to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, Thomas and Sarah sold her remaining property there, a house and lot inherited from her first husband. In December, the Little Pigeon Church granted them a "Letter of Dismission," recalled it upon receiving a complaint from another member, then restored it after a meeting which "settled the difficulty," probably a doctrinal one. In mid-February, Thomas served on a committee to straighten out another dispute between members, suggesting that by then he was once more back in good standing. It was his last act as a citizen of the Little Pigeon community. Just a week later, on February 20, 1830, he sold his west 80 acres to Charles Grigsby for \$125. Tradition says Thomas traded his 20-acre tract for a horse - a fair price in those days - and sold to David Turnham all his stock and grain, "about 100 hogs and 4 or 5 hundred bushels of corn."

Piling all their goods into three wagons, the Lincoln family, now grown to 13 persons, pulled slowly away from the homestead, picked up the road to Vincennes about 4 miles north, and plodded steadily towards Illinois. It was March 1, 1830. Atop one of the wagons sat Abraham Lincoln, just turned 21. On March 6, the caravan crossed the Wabash, flooded by spring rains. Within the month they came at last to John Hank's place on the north bank of the Sangamon River, 8 miles west of Decatur, Illinois. Abraham Lincoln, product of the Kentucky hills and Indiana forests, had reached the prairie country that would claim his next 30 years.

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